



By Michael Muchmore

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- Tablets ▶
- Cell Phones ▶
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- Cameras ▶
- HDTVs ▶
- Printers ▶
- Scanners ▶
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- Storage ▶
- Software ▶
- Security ▶
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The Best Browser You Don't Know
Maxthon gives the big names a run for their money, competing on speed, features, and HTML support.
 Editor Rating ●●●●○

Should You Upgrade? SMB Social Media Review: Maxthon 3.4

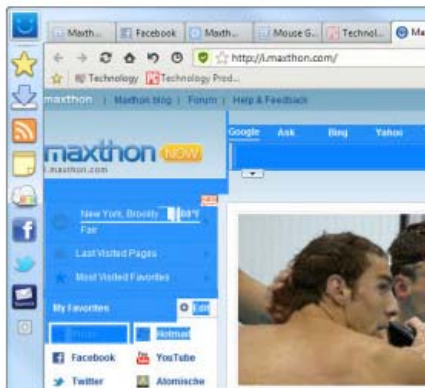
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Maxthon 3.4

EDITOR RATING
●●●●○
 excellent

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Pros

Loads of web-consuming tools. Excellent HTML5 support. Good speed. Syncing. Extensions. Do Not Track support. IE and Chrome page rendering engines improve site compatibility.

Cons

Occasional crashes. Some will find interface too busy. Weak tab implementation. Weak hardware acceleration performance.

Bottom Line

Maxthon is the browser with everything but the kitchen sink—speed, HTML5, and boatloads of features.



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Lead Software Analyst



There's a new browser in town, and it's toting some pretty impressive firepower. In fact, Maxthon has been around for nearly a decade, but it will probably be new to most who read this. Maxthon 3.4 is not only the most feature-rich browser you'll find, but its speed and standards compatibility levels are eyebrow-raising. Want to capture video playing inside the browser or grab a screenshot, Maxthon has the tools. Want syncing of tabs, bookmarks, and even notes? You guessed it, Maxthon can do it with built-in tools. Sick of bright white webpage backgrounds burning out your eyes? Maxthon's night mode can come to your rescue. You don't have to worry about a site being incompatible with the maverick browser, either, since it includes both [Google Chrome's](#) and [Internet Explorer's](#) underlying webpage rendering engines.

Contents

Maxthon 3.4

Performance and
Compatibility

NEXT

Interface

By default, Maxthon's interface isn't as sparse as those of the current browser crowd. But it has a few brilliant touches, and as you use it you'll discover more and more as you go along. A rail along the left gives access to Favorites, Downloads, Feeds, SkyNotes (more on that later), and Tab sync. But you can add extensions to this rail, such as a Facebook sharer, a Twitter tweeter, shopping assisters, and games. I didn't see an ad blocker in Maxthon's own extension gallery, but third-party Maxthon extension sites offer them.



To the left of the tabs along the very top, you'll see a large blue smiley-face button, which accesses the program's large main menu dialog. The smiley turns into your own user picture when you create a syncing account

with Maxthon, making for a truly personalized browser. And the personalization goes even further: The Skins feature lets you radically customize the browser's border, tabs, and buttons, with hundreds of choices ranging from cute kid-style themes to polished metal looks. It's a lot more power over the look of your browser than you get with Chrome or IE. Installation of skins is quick and restart-free, and once you've downloaded one, it's available from a button on the browser border.

Tabs

Maxthon's tab implementation is actually a weak spot: I couldn't rip a tab out to create a new browser window, as I could with every other major browser. And forget about [Opera 12's](#) tab previews or IE, Chrome, and Firefox's tab-pinning. Another minor inconvenience is that you can't close a tab unless it's the active one. But the browser does offer a unique split-screen view that shows two tab contents side by side. A button dropdown lets you close or refresh all tabs at once.

Maxthon's new-tab page is every bit as useful as that of any other browser, save possibly Opera's, which offers live updated mini apps. In Maxthon, you can move the link tiles around on the grid to taste, and add any sites you want (Chrome only puts your most-visited sites on the tiles.) Maxthon also lets you choose a background either from stock art you're your own images. And you can sync the tiles with your other Maxthon installations or hide them for a blank white page. When I tried syncing, however, each tile on the second PC showed my present above the default tile, and didn't link to my choice.

Extras

Now for the fun stuff: As I mentioned at the outset, Maxthon comes more stocked with goodies than any browser you're likely to encounter. Traversing around the edges of the browser window reveals these. I already mentioned the Extensions bar on the left, but some of the cooler features lurk in the toolbar button at top right and in the lower-right border.

A highlight among these perks is the Resource Sniffer, accessible from the toolbar. Go to any page that contains video, music, or photos, and the Resource Sniffer can download it all for you. But when you're on a page with video with Sniffer enabled, the movie plays in a separate Maxthon video window, which can be annoying and hard to dismiss. And on a page that offered MP3 downloads, the Sniffer didn't show any audio files available. I was however able to download videos from all the major video sharing sites.

Other nifty options in the toolbar include Magic Fill—pretty a multi-account password manager; Snap, which grabs a screen capture of either the whole browser or an area you select with a cross-hairs; Feed Reader, which can display RSS and Atom feeds nicely; and SkyNote, which lets you jot down text that will be available from other devices running Maxthon. The toolbar also gives access to frequently needed Windows items like My Computer, Paint, Calc, and you can even add any program to run from the External Tools button.

A favorite Maxthon trick of mine is Night Mode, which darkens bright interfaces—it even lets you choose text and background colors—for any site. Akin to this is the Mute button at the bottom in the status bar, which makes sure you won't be disturbed by noisy auto-playing sites. You can also set the status bar to display your upload or download speeds, CPU usage, and IP address.

Like Safari, Maxthon offers a "reading view" for text-heavy webpages. This eliminates distracting ads and images. When you arrive at a suitable page, a book icon appears in the address bar, and clicking this presents a clean white page of text. Another cool visual tool is the "telestrator": Holding down the right mouse button, you can highlight an area on any Web page.

One extra you don't get in Maxthon (but do in Opera) is a built-in BitTorrent client. Nor, for that matter, will you get Opera's Turbo Mode, mail client, or Speed Dial apps. Like Opera, Maxthon allows mouse-gesture input, for example, letting you navigate back by holding the right button and clicking on the left one. Use Maxthon for a while, and you'll likely find even more hidden treasures.

Syncing and Start Page

Maxthon by default starts up with a pretty useful start page, showing links, news, search, and popular videos. You can customize to the hilt, with your own links and location. I mentioned that you can use Maxthon's Cloud Sync to synchronize notes on any computer or device you use to log into Maxthon; you can do the same for bookmarks, options, the address bar, new-tab links, and Magic Fill passwords. A separate extension enables tab syncing, too.

Performance

There's really only one thing you need to know about Maxthon when it comes to speed: It beats Chrome on Google's own benchmark! The benchmark, V8, is designed to "reflect the performance of well-structured object-based applications." Since Maxthon's JavaScript engine is a tweaked version of Chrome's it's not surprising that it does well. But it also excels on Mozilla's Kraken, though it's only middling on the oft-cited SunSpider benchmark from [WebKit](#). Here are the results from my test machine, a 2.53GHz Core 2 Duo PC with 3GB of RAM running 32-bit Windows 7 Professional:

Browser	Google V8 (v.6) Score (higher is better)
Maxthon 3.4	9767
Google Chrome 20	9353
Firefox 14	5633
Opera 12	3572
Safari 5.1	2679
Internet Explorer 9	2048

Contents

Maxthon 3.4
Performance and
Compatibility

[← BACK](#)

Browser	Mozilla Kraken 1.1 Score in ms (lower is better)
Maxthon 3.4	3299
Google Chrome 20	3579
Firefox 14	4347
Opera 12	12336
Safari 5.1	15898
Internet Explorer 9	16794

Browser	SunSpider 0.9.1 Score in ms (lower is better)
Google Chrome 20	255
Internet Explorer 9	260
Opera 12	290
Maxthon 3.4	296
Firefox 14	294
Safari 5.1	304

To test whether and how well Maxthon implements graphics hardware acceleration, a performance booster pioneered by Microsoft's IE team, I ran a couple of hardware acceleration tests: from Microsoft's [IETestdrive](#) site, [Psychedelic Browsing](#), and [Mozilla's hardware acceleration stress test](#). Here were my results on a 3.4GHz quad core PC with 4GB RAM and an ATI Radeon HD 4290 graphics card, running Windows 7 Ultimate.

Browser with ATI Radeon HD 4290/3.4GHz quad core	Psychedelic Browsing RPM (higher is better)
Internet Explorer 9	4414 (correct sound)
Firefox 14	4142 (no sound)
Google Chrome 20	3516 (correct sound)
Opera 12	1012 (no sound)
Maxthon 3.4	291
Safari 5.1.7	26 (correct sound)

Browser with ATI Radeon HD 4290/3.4GHz quad core**Mozilla Hardware Acceleration Stress Test
FPS (higher is better)**

Firefox 14	60+
Internet Explorer 9	60+
Google Chrome 20	60+
Google Chrome 19	60+
Opera 12	45
Maxthon 3.4	20
Safari 5.1.7	12

On this test, Maxthon falls down a bit. It does appear to have some modicum of hardware acceleration implemented, but it's not even close to IE, Chrome, or Firefox.

Startup Time

How long do you have to wait before a browser is usable? That's another key performance question, and as with other measures, browsers have tightened up their differences on this measure. On my 2.53GHz dual-core Windows 7 laptop with 3GB RAM, after a reboot Maxthon made a decent, middle-of-the pack showing (but still far faster startup-slugs Opera and Safari), at 2.5 seconds. None of the browsers is likely to annoy you with its warm restart time, including Maxthon, as you can see in the second column of this table:

Browser	Cold Startup Time (seconds)	Warm Startup Time (seconds)
Internet Explorer 9	2.2	1.9
Chrome 20	2.3	1.5
Maxthon 3.4	2.5	1.5
Firefox 14	2.7	1.7
Opera 12	6.1	1.9
Safari 5.1	6.6	2.2

Compatibility

Maxthon has one of the best compatibility stories you could imagine: It includes *both* the page-rendering engine that underlies Internet Explorer, and that of Chrome. In all my browsing with it, I haven't run into a single page that displayed a "browser not supported" message.

In HTML5 support, Maxthon just yielded the crown to Chrome, with that browser's release of version 21. But our underdog still makes a remarkable showing on the HTML5Test.com measure of HTML5 support. The test is out of a maximum of 500 points, each awarded for supporting features of the standard, and "Bonus Points" for features that aren't technically part of HTML5 but are nice to have, such as additional video codecs. Maxthon still wins for these bonuses—not surprising for the browser that's all about extra perks.

Browser	HTML5Test.com Score (higher is better)	Bonus Points
Google Chrome 21	437	13
Maxthon 3.4	422	15
Opera 12	385	9
Firefox 8	314	9
Opera 11.60	325	9
Safari 5.1	252	2
Internet Explorer 9	141	5

But you can't really say that Maxthon is a leader in HTML5 support, since it doesn't implement HTML5 `getUserMedia`, which lets the browser access the webcam and microphone without the need for a plugin like Adobe Flash or Microsoft Silverlight.

Security and Privacy

Maxthon includes a safe URL checker, but there was no download protection like that you get in Internet Explorer. I was able to download and run an executable program without any warning from the browser. On Browserscope's [security tests](#), Maxthon comes out slightly ahead of Firefox and IE9, with a score of 14 out of 17, compared with 13 for IE9, 12 for Firefox, and 16 for Chrome. Maxthon uses separate processes for tabs, and uses Chrome-like sandboxing to isolate page code from affecting your system.



For privacy, like all the other browsers Maxthon offers Private Browsing, accessible from the main menu. Any history or downloaded files from surfing done in a private session won't be saved. Like all other

browsers besides Chrome, Maxthon implements the Do Not Track standard, and it's the only browser I've tested that has this protection turned on by default! Another unique feature is the ability to lock the browser, so others can't use it till you log in again.

All is not perfection, however. A couple of time, I encountered a message box telling me the browser had encountered a fatal error. But the program does save open tabs in case of a crash.

Browsing to the Max?

Maxthon's approach seem to be to add just about every distinguishing feature that every other browser brings to the mix. It's use of IE and Chrome's page rendering engines is yet another evidence of this. But it adds a few goodies of its own, like the built-in media downloader, night view, and screen capture tool. Performance and capability with the latest standards haven't suffered, either. Maxthon is second only to Chrome in its HTML5Test result.

But despite all its bells and whistles, which will no doubt appeal to many, Maxthon isn't really an innovator, instead, throwing in all the features other browsers have devised. It's behind in hardware acceleration, and occasionally crashed in my testing. And though Maxthon deserves a tip of the hat—and your trying it out—it doesn't unseat our Editors' Choice, [Google Chrome](#), which speeds browsing with its Instant features and truly leads in standards support.